

TESTIMONY REGARDING THE SPLITTING UP OF OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND SERRVICES FOR THE BLIND (BESB) INTO 'TWO PARTS AND ADDING ONE INTO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ERVICES AND THE OTHER INTO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Appropriations Committee Hearing -5:00 PM, Friday, March 4, 2011 – HB 6380

My name is Bruce Woodward. I am here today, Friday March 4, 2011, to urge that the Board oOf Education and Services for the Blind be continued as a 'stand alone' agency.

I was born with both a hearing loss and with retinitis pigmentosa but I did not become legally blind until I was 30 years old. During my working career at Travelers Insurance Company BESB came into the picture and with the blessing of my employer I went back to school to learn computer programming. That marked the beginning of the best years of my working career thanks to BESB. My belief is that this outcome would most likely not have occurred under the Department of Social Services or Department of Education. BESB provides specialized services that I fear would not be provided under an 'umbrella agency'. Now I am not being naive if I contend that BESB is absolutely the only source that would have provided such a great outcome for me. But I do contend that BESB is, by far, the best source of qualified services for me and for the blind of Connecticut. To put it bluntly, 'If It ain't broke, don't fix it'.

My wife Betty, who is also legally blind, and I have had a close relationship with BESB for many years because of our strong commitment to the improvement of services and training of the blind, both young and old. We both are very active in the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, a consumer group dedicated to providing advice and support fro the blind. At the national level the NFB has successfully initiated important legislation in a number of areas.

BESB has become an outstanding agency under the extremely capable leadership of its current Executive Director, Brian Sigman. He has managed the agency with great skill and dealt with challenging issues with sensitivity and understanding. On the national level he has served as chairman of an association of fellow executive leaders of blind agencies of all fifty states. One of my keen relationships with Director Sigman has been to meet with polling officials of several towns and cities on the issue of improving the vote by phone procedures at polling locations. What a blessing it has been to the blind to be able to vote independently. I firmly believe that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind will do the best job for the blind of Connecticut by remaining independent. I sincerely question the premise that splitting BESB between two 'mega' agencies cost effective. The needs of the blind and the newly blind would suffer greatly if handled by an 'all purpose' agencies. Blindness does require specialized services. The State of New Mexico consolidated its agency for the blind with other agencies a number of years ago and their experience proved to be very poor as far as providing services for the blind. They then reverted back to an independent agency for the blind. My wife and I visited that 'resurrected' agency two years ago and witnessed a 'model' agency at work. Without question the blind of New Mexico are far better off!

Bruce B. Woodward, Treasurer National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut